

## EDITORIAL

# A Nation Under God

*by Frank Bateman Stanger*

I have been disturbed by certain extreme attitudes toward the present celebration of the American bicentennial. It seems to me to be either a “cop-out” or unthinking arrogance when someone says, “We should never think about the past; let’s live in the present.” I am also wary of those individuals who want no outward displays of patriotism. I wonder how such folks manifest enthusiastic appreciation, if they do, on other occasions that merit celebration. Moreover, I am concerned by the lack of historical perspective on the part of those who say that the histories of all nations are of equal significance, in spite of the length or brevity of their existence, and regardless of the extent of their influence upon the history of the entire world. Just so, I fail to understand those who believe that the Kingdom of God has no relation to “the kingdoms of this world.”

I have some deep convictions about the American nation and the present observance of the bicentennial. I believe that God has been dramatically active in the history of the American nation. I believe that we must listen to the lessons of history. I believe that the celebration of the American bicentennial can be a divinely-approved opportunity for both personal and national renewal. This year 1976 should be an occasion for re-studying our heritage, both from political and moral perspectives, and our bicentennial celebration can focus properly on the primary issue: what does it mean to be a nation under God?

### Reflection

The occasion of the American bicentennial is a time for *reflection*. We need to reflect upon the spiritual ideals and values which inspired and undergirded the founding of our nation. Our country has a Christian heritage. Its early history was guided by men who feared God. Our Constitution, though not a religious creed, is built upon principles

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*Dr. Frank Bateman Stanger is President of Asbury Theological Seminary. He holds the Th.B. degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and the S.T.M. and S.T.D. degrees from Temple University.*

drawn from the thoughts of men who knew and understood the Bible. The British historian, H. G. Wells, referred to our Constitution as “indubitably Christian.”

Religious faith has been a major influence in the molding of our democratic opinions, convictions and social contacts. Our nation is an American transplant of the Reformation and the Renaissance, a unique hybrid of faith and reason, of individual freedom and private judgment. In our nation faith and freedom have reinforced each other.

The real strength of America has been spiritual. The greatest asset of our national heritage is the strength of our religious faith. Religious motivations were influential in bringing people to these shores, and provisions for religious liberty were a vital element in the form of government established here. The Christian religion has provided the framework of belief and values within which our nation throughout its history has affirmed its meaning and purpose. Religious hopes and convictions have been an important factor in shaping this country's self-awareness of its duty and destiny through the centuries and in determining how it would respond to challenges and difficulties.

### **Repentance**

The observance of the American bicentennial must also become a time of *repentance*. In a very real sense our nation's past is judging us. We Americans have so much for which we need to repent. We need to repent of our abuse of divine blessings. We have bespoiled the creation. We have become gross materialists. We have increasingly identified the Kingdom of God with our national well-being. Tragically, human value is being judged largely in terms of material acquisitions and worldly power.

We must repent of our loss of spiritual priorities. We have become dominated by a philosophy of secularism and an accompanying nihilism. Making the sensate world the criterion of our judgment, we have lost our sense of moral and spiritual absolutes. Secular attitudes have replaced religious convictions. We have slipped from our spiritual moorings. We have not been faithful to our Christian heritage and to those principles which made our nation great. Everywhere there is the evidence of the decline of the influence of the Christian Church upon the society of which it is a part.

Our dimmed sense of God has made us callous in respect to others. We must repent for our heritage of slavery and racial bias. In many

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areas of social, economic, and political life we have been unjust and irresponsible.

We must repent of the loss of our moral integrity. Morally, America is on the downgrade. Moral and spiritual decay is growing like a cancer. The arts, entertainment, politics, the media, have been overtaken by sinister demonic forces. Crime has increased at an alarming rate. We are witnessing an increasing flood of pornography and such obscenity in literature and films is a critical reflection of our nation. Alcoholism and the use of drugs and other harmful indulgences have increased at a frightening rate.

America must repent!

### **Re-evaluation**

The celebration of the American bicentennial becomes a strategic opportunity for *re-evaluation*. We need to face seriously the issue as to whether the moral and spiritual motivations of our founding fathers remain a propelling and sustaining force in our national life today. Are there evidences that our American culture is running out of “ideological gas”? Our founding fathers held certain truths to be self-evident — the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Does our nation still cherish such a faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does the American populace still hold such truths to be self-evident?

Is faith really alive in our nation? Our nation was born out of a religious spirit and the secret of the American experiment is to be found in the Biblical injunction: “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.” Freedoms are assured only as the result of a secure faith. Is America’s faith strong enough to keep its freedoms?

And what about the contemporary absence of a controlling sense of national destiny? How astonished our colonial forebearers would be at our low level of expectation for our nation. Do we really perceive what is to be our national destiny from this time forward? Do we have a consensus for our mission? Have our national expectations become fore-shortened almost to the vanishing point?

In our re-evaluation we need to ask honestly whether the original American Dream needs revision, whether we may actually need a new American Dream. Dr. Albert C. Outler calls upon the nation to write another “declaration,” this time of interdependence. He declares:

America must switch from fat to lean, from waste to conservation, from self-indulgence to self-discipline, from con-

spicuous expenditures and flaunted leisure to new codes of thrift, industry, and distributive justice . . . . The Puritans gave us their declaration of dependence (upon God). The Founding Fathers gave us their declaration of independence. Now comes our turn: which is to write, and live out, a declaration of interdependence . . . on God and each other.

### Renewal

The experience of the American bicentennial must become a time of *renewal*. Both individuals and societies meet God either in judgment or renewal. Arnold Toynbee in his monumental *Study of History* wrote of the 21 civilizations who have met God in judgment and have perished from the earth. Toynbee warns Western civilization of the impending possibility of doom and extinction. America as a nation is no exception in God's moral economy. But Americans can choose to meet God in renewal if they so desire.

Renewal always begins with the individual. We must acknowledge that each of us is involved with our nation. We must recognize that our personal renewal will contribute to national renewal. True renewal actually begins when we seek and accept the truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. To be a true patriot for the sake of one's country, therefore, means for the Christian a valid relationship with Christ as Savior and Lord.

Each of us must resolve to pursue Christ's truth and live by its teachings in every area of our lives. We must pray. We must reach out to meet specific needs in the lives of others and in social relationships wherever they exist. We must recognize that the only valid, effective freedom is a disciplined freedom: the exercise of liberty within self-imposed limits. We must realize that the religious sources of American ideals will best be honored through their manifestation in individual lives. There must be a rebirth of religious experience in America. In the spirit of Abraham Lincoln we must "bind up the nation's wounds" and pray and act "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

There must be a reassertion of faith in God's power to resensitize the American conscience, individually and corporately. The future of America rests heavily upon its conscience. If that conscience, quickened by the Holy Spirit, individually and collectively, is responsible to the Word of God, then ours is an inventory of hope for the future.